



Theme Essay

This theme invites people of all ages to read and discuss books that highlight both the differences and similarities between generations. With *The Wizard of Oz*, for instance, young people may be encountering the story for the first time, travelling in wonder with Dorothy and Toto along the yellow brick road to the City of Emeralds. Adults, revisiting Oz after reading the book years ago or maybe seeing the movie version, might recall their first encounter and notice aspects of the tale that escaped them earlier. Such a conversation allows us to shift perspectives and consider how passing years and life experiences shape reader response.

Generational issues are present in *The Lord of the Flies*, where William Golding tells of a group of British schoolboys stranded on a remote tropical island, due to a wartime plane crash. These boys may be young innocents, casualties of a violent adult world bent on death and destruction, but their behavior on the island may suggest that adults do not have a monopoly on cruelty. The story may also suggest that children are not as innocent and kind as they are sometimes portrayed, that without the civilizing and disciplining of adult guidance children can easily revert to brutal savagery. Rather than offer a simple answer, Golding invites readers to reflect and consider.

Three books feature young people searching out their identities and values while trying to navigate the mysteries and complexities of a world they never made. Although different in many ways, all three feature thoughtful and engaging young narrators whose words and actions will strike a chord with young and old alike. Lawrence, in *When We Were Romans*, spends so much time supporting and trying to understand his mother that we might wonder which one is the adult. Arnold, in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, struggles with his feelings about a cultural heritage and adult role models that sometimes inspire and sometimes discourage him. Lily, in *The Secret Life of Bees*, lives with her cold and uncommunicative father. Haunted by a mystery about her mother's death and her own possible role in it, she turns for answers to the Calendar sisters, some older women possessed of understanding and empathy that prove invaluable to her on many levels.

While most of the books have youthful protagonists, *Home Mountains* and *The Old Man and the Sea* focus more directly on older generations. In *Home Mountains*, Susan Swetnam often looks back at her childhood for crucial experiences that have shaped her life and pauses to



consider what she now understands about the adults in her life that she couldn't have known as a child. The old man in Ernest Hemingway's book lives a life that includes much solitude and reflection, a life that depends for much of its meaning on a bond with a young boy.

All of these selections explore timeless issues related to different stages of the human life cycle, reminding adults what it was to be young, and offering younger readers a window into the land of adulthood.

